

Dr Avis Glaze is sharing with New Zealand what worked in Ontario to lift student achievement.

# No throw-away kids

Dr Avis Glaze is now advising our government after a leading role in successful education reform in Ontario, Canada. **WAYNE ERB** finds out what drives her



## Dr Avis Glaze

**Role:** Member of the independent advisory group for National Standards.

**Noted for:** Taking a leading role in lifting literacy and numeracy outcomes in Ontario, Canada.

**Has learnt:** "There is a place in our society for each and every one of our children."

**A** child not reading after a year at school could well become a problem later. Still not reading after two or three years and you can predict a high likelihood of future difficulties, says Dr Avis Glaze.

"If children do not learn to read in primary school and we do not intervene early, the challenges multiply. Reading is the gateway to future success in school. Many children who are not achieving success often start dropping out psychologically before school-leaving age."

Talk with Avis, who led the Ontario provincial government's approach to lifting literacy and numeracy achievement, and you'll soon sense a determination to change such outcomes for the better.

"Education is the primary means of securing the prosperity of our nation and the life prospects of our children," she says. And as long as she can move, she'll help.

"When I was a little girl growing up in Jamaica, I felt I would choose education because educators can help change the world. As long as there are still children to educate, my mission is not accomplished."

As a young teacher, she moved from

Jamaica to Canada for postgraduate studies and stayed on to teach and work in many parts of the education system.

She was in charge of a school district when the Ontario government picked her to be its first Chief Student Achievement Officer and to establish and lead the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat in 2004.

"The secretariat was created by Premier Dalton McGuinty and the Minister of Education to work directly with schools and drive change in the system," says Avis.

She hired teachers and school leaders who were experts in literacy and numeracy. Consensus was built around the professional development, research, target-setting, school planning and assessment strategies that followed. There were focused interventions for low-performing schools, and many schools in challenging circumstances have made steady improvements.

Ontario students are doing better and the morale of teachers is higher than six years ago. Last year, Avis retired from the secretariat and now works with educators in several countries. Recently, she visited New Zealand and joined an independent advisory group to support

implementation of the National Standards.

Avis has repeatedly said there can be no “throw-away kids”; every child deserves to learn and society needs them to become contributing and productive citizens.

She tells the *Education Gazette* that every student, regardless of his or her background or special needs, has potential and can learn with time, support and effective teaching. In spite of the inherent challenges, schools have responsibility for the students who come through the door.

“Whatever that potential is, the school must find it and enhance it,” she says. “They are not all going to be doctors and lawyers, or whatever occupations a society values, but they must all reach their potential. There is a place in our society for each and every one of our children.”

She says there are also moral, economic and health concerns behind education reform. We either pay now or pay later. Societies that close the achievement gap fare better.

How would Avis respond to anyone who considered her stance overly idealistic?

“I would debate the issues with them. I would show them the evidence of schools around the world that have raised the achievement levels of children from diverse backgrounds. As well, if you are a parent, you don’t want your child to be one of those throw-away kids. Education is here to serve children and their parents.”

She does not absolve parents of responsibility to be involved in education but she does not blame them either. A thrust of the strategy in Ontario was to increase meaningful parental involvement in education so their voice was heard in the improvement strategy.

She left her job in Ontario seeing many signs that the education sector has a clear focus on improving student achievement. Teachers have positive energy. There is a surge of confidence among educators in their abilities, and she thinks New Zealand is heading in a similar direction.

“New Zealand is focused on excellence with equity. These are not polar opposites; they are two sides of the same coin.”

She feels excited about our potential if we pursue a robust education strategy that meets the needs of all students. She said much the same during a presentation at the Ministry of Education, speaking to policy makers but clearly referring to the important role of teachers and principals.

“You are building in your classrooms each day, the future New Zealand that we all envision. Improvement happens with your skill and goodwill. That is the power and privilege of being an educator today.” ■

# Highlights from the Ontario story

Dr Avis Glaze is the latest visitor from a Canadian province with a good track record on schooling improvement

**H**ow Ontario improved literacy and numeracy has captured the interest of our policy makers. Beside Dr Avis Glaze, influential Ontario figures Michael Fullan and Ben Levin have both visited New Zealand in the past two years. So what’s been going on there?

Dr Avis Glaze told her part of the Ontario story at the Ministry of Education’s national office.

The province has over 2 million school students (compared with 760,000 here) so the system-wide improvements that Avis supported were large-scale.

The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat backed a range of projects to increase the capacity of teachers to support learning.

Academics were hired to write monographs so “teachers could be steeped in research” on what works in the classroom. It also found schools in challenging circumstances that were doing well, and it shared their knowledge.

“In our strategy the intention was to adopt a humane approach that built upon our knowledge of what motivates and inspires people to do their best work. We were going to bring out their will and sharpen their skill,” says Avis. By the same token, change where necessary was expected.

“We made it clear that failure was not an option and that we had to improve with a sense of urgency. My common refrain was ‘the children cannot wait’.”

The secretariat worked with school districts to set ambitious targets for student achievement, while avoiding blame or one-

size-fits-all approaches. It advised schools on writing improvement plans with a few priorities and goals and clearly defined strategies.

It ensured school budgets were aligned with school plans. It rejected league tables. Instead, her team developed a ‘statistical neighbours tool’ that let school leaders identify schools with similar characteristics that had improved. This was a powerful way to overcome unhelpful beliefs about poverty and achievement, says Avis.

“As a leader, I did not accept cynicism or unwillingness to focus on the strategies that we know work well.”

When reviewing school data in the early days of the strategy, she found a few schools where a large percentage of students were not being assessed provincially, ostensibly because of special learning needs. She took it on herself to discuss the issue with principals and superintendents.

“I told them it’s not about scores, it’s about learning. They could not leave those kids out, they had to teach them.”

The secretariat’s student achievement officers help schools to set up effective professional learning communities, says Avis. Their role is to help build capacity rather than be an inspector.

“They are looking at inquiry – are they talking about student achievement, are they sharing successful practices? This is about whole school improvement.”

The story isn’t over in Ontario, but large improvements in the percentage of students at or above provincial standards have been made across all school types. ■



Ontario provides schooling for over 2 million students and has focused on improving literacy and numeracy and raising high school graduation rates.